

	Buffalo's Name Origin: Theories Summarized and Ranked	
A view of the Lake & Fort Erie from Buffalo Creek, 1810. This is the first-known picture ever made of what is now Buffalo.		Horsemeat
Buffalo Creek	The one thing that all name theorists agree on is that Buffalo the city takes its name from Buffalo Creek, now called the Buffalo River. The debate revolves around how the creek got its name. Buffalo Creek was known by that name before the Revolutionary War. The name first appears on a map drawn ca. 1762 by Lt. George Demler, who was stationed at Fort Niagara. By 1764, the name was known to Captain John Montresor, who describes pursuing a party of Allegheny Indians to Buffalo Creek in his journal, June 22, 1764.	Beaver Creek
Seven theories	We identified seven theories about how Buffalo got its name. We present each one here on its own page, with evidence in favor and opposed, and sources. We then added our own plausibility ranking. Links to each theory are in the right column and across the top of the page.	Seneca Name
Credits	By Cynthia Van Ness and a terrific library volunteer who wishes to remain nameless. ©The Buffalo History Museum, 2021	Bison
Edits	If we find new theories, sources, or evidence, we will add them to this document.	Basswood
View as a PDF	This document is also online as a PDF that you can page through	Beau Fleuve
Short, sharable link	https://tinyurl.com/TBHM-BufferalName	Bois Blanc
A bibliography	Here are some works that present various Buffalo name origin theories	
Contact us	library@buffalohistory.org	Last updated May 21, 2022

	Stolen Horsemeat Theory	Horsemeat
First Published	1825	Beaver Creek
Synopsis	French explorers or missionaries in need of provisions found a horse presumably belonging to indigenous people, stole it, and served it to their party claiming it was bison meat. The place of this meal was remembered thereafter as Buffalo Creek.	Seneca Name
Evidence in Favor	Frederick Houghton reports that in 1754, the French called the creek <i>Riviere aux Chevaux</i> , or River of Horses, because they pastured some horses on its banks.	Bison
Evidence Opposed	Sheldon Ball , the first and only known reporter of this theory, admits that it's an interesting story, but he has no proof.	Basswood
Sources	Rare F 129 .B8 B833 1825 Ball, Sheldon <i>Buffalo in 1825: containing historical and statistical sketches ; illustrated with a map of the village and view of the harbor.</i> Buffalo: S. Ball, 1825 Houghton Frederick "History of the Buffalo Creek Reservation." <i>Buffalo Historical Society Publications</i>, 1920, vol. 24, p. 65	Beau Fleuve
Plausibility Level	Low	Bois Blanc

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM	Mistranslation of Beaver Creek Theory	Horsemeat
First Published	1862	Beaver Creek
Synopsis	There was miscommunication between the Iroquois and American negotiators during the writing of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784. The Treaty's use of "Buffaloe creek" could have been a mistranslation of "Beaver creek" since the two words are similar in Seneca. This was Millard Fillmore's theory.	Seneca Name
Evidence in Favor	The Seneca words for beaver and buffalo have the exact same ending. Beaver were plentiful in the area; buffalo were not. The Senecas have no buffalo clan, but they do have a beaver clan. Cornplanter used the name "Beaver Creek" on a single occasion in a speech in 1790.	Bison
Evidence Opposed	The supposed discrepancy between <i>Tushua</i> , also spelled <i>Te-osah-way</i> , and <i>Tehosororon</i> consists of the fact that the former is the Seneca, and the latter is the Mohawk pronunciation of the same word, both meaning Place of the Basswood. The Seneca Indians applied the name <i>Te-osah-way</i> , or The Place of Basswood to their settlement, and <i>Tick-e-ack-gou-ga-ha-unda</i> or "Buffalo creek" to the stream only. The Seneca words for beaver and buffalo have the same ending, so Cornplanter's speech could have easily been misinterpreted. The name Buffalo creek, not Beaver creek, is uniformly used in other public records and treaties. The Senecas always referred to the area as Place of Basswood.	Basswood
Sources	" Inaugural Address of the Hon. Millard Fillmore, Delivered at American Hall, July 1, 1862. " <i>Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society</i> , Vol. 1. Buffalo: Bigelow Brothers, 1870 Cornplanter. " To George Washington from the Seneca Chiefs ," 1 December 1790. Washington Papers, U.S. National Archives.	Beau Fleuve
Plausibility Level	Low	Bois Blanc

	Seneca Indian Named Buffalo Theory	Horsemeat
First Published	1863	Beaver Creek
Synopsis	A Native American whose Seneca name <i>De-gi-yah-go</i> meant Buffalo in English lived by the creek. White settlers found him there, learned his name and meaning, and called the creek by this.	Seneca Name
Evidence in Favor	Other creeks in Erie County bear the names of persons: Scajaquada Creek is named for John or his son Philip Conjockety, Senecas who resided on its shore near the Niagara River. According to William Beauchamp, Smoke's or Smoke Creek, which flows into Lake Erie in Lackawanna, is named for a native that white settlers called Old Smoke. The former Cornelius Creek, now buried under the vicinity of Hertel Avenue, is named for the two Cornelius brothers. William Beauchamp describes them as Negroes living on its banks during or after the Sullivan expedition of 1779. William Ketchum learned this theory from Nathaniel T. Strong, a Seneca chief. Daniel Dobbins stopped here in 1795 & learned this theory from Cornelius Winney, an Indian trader and one of Buffalo's earliest non-native residents.	Bison
Evidence Opposed	Unlike Scajaquada Creek, the existence of this Indian is hard to substantiate.	Basswood
Sources	Ketchum, William "The Origin of the Name of Buffalo: read before the Buffalo Historical Society, April 7, 1863." <i>Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society</i>, vol. 1. Buffalo: Bigelow Brothers, 1870 Severance, Frank, ed. "Dobbins Papers." <i>Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society</i>, 1905. Vol. 8, p. 299-300 Q11 .N82 no. 108, p. 61 Beauchamp, William New York State Museum Bulletin 108: Aboriginal Place Names of New York Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, 1907 Houghton, Frederick Buffalo Creek Reservation, section V: The name of Buffalo <i>Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society</i>, vol. 24, p. 69 Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1920	Beau Fleuve
Plausibility Level	High	Bois Blanc

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM	Bison Roamed Here Theory	Horsemeat
First published	1863	Beaver Creek
Synopsis	Wild bison were attracted to the water and a nearby salt lick, hence the area came to be called Buffalo Creek.	Seneca Name
Evidence in favor	William Ketchum cited numerous primary sources supporting the presence of bison at Buffalo Creek in the 1700s. Among them: In 1718, Marquis de Vaudreuil wrote, "Buffalos abound on the south shore of the Lake Erie, but not on the north" (Beauchamp, p. 60). Seneca elders, interviewed in 1820, recalled bison bones at the salt lick, and had learned from their elders that bison had been seen in the area around 1720 (Ketchum, vol. 2, p.74). Ketchum quotes Nathaniel T. Strong, a Seneca chief, "The Senecas were conversant with the fact that the buffalo formerly visited the salt lick or spring on the bank of the creek in this vicinity" (Ketchum, vol.2, p. 71). French Creek in Waterford, PA, a hundred miles south of Buffalo, was called <i>La Riviere aux Boeufs</i> by the French because of the bison that once ranged there. Fort le Boeuf was built there.	Bison
Evidence opposed	William Beauchamp quotes Nathaniel T. Strong, who was Seneca, "I have been trying in vain to find a river, creek, lake, or mountain that now bears the name of any herbiferous animal in our state" [in the original Iroquois]. Archaeologist Frederick Houghton argues that had bison grazed here, they would have been hunted as food animals and their bones would turn up in indigenous refuse heaps. He has found no such bones in pre-European middens. The <i>Buffalo Courier</i> reported in 1925 that bison bones were discovered during excavation of the Terrace near Main St.. According to a personal communication from Kathryn Leacock, Director of Collections at the Buffalo Museum of Science, July 14, 2015, the bones came into their collection but were never positively identified as bison. They are cataloged as "unidentified bovid [cattle] bones."	Basswood
Sources	Ketchum, William "The Origin of the Name of Buffalo; read before the Buffalo Historical Society, April 7, 1863." <i>Buffalo Historical Society Publications</i>, vol. 1, 1870 Hornaday, William T. Map illustrating the extermination of the American bison Issued with: <i>Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution ...1887</i> Q11 .N82 no. 108, p. 61 Beauchamp, William New York State Museum Bulletin 108: Aboriginal Place Names of New York Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, 1907 Houghton, Frederick Buffalo Creek Reservation, section V: The name of Buffalo <i>Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society</i>, vol. 24, p. 67 Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1920 "Discovery of Bison Bones in City Indicates Buffalo Came Honestly by Name." <i>Buffalo Courier</i>; Dec. 31, 1925 Fort Le Boeuf Historical Society Waterford, PA	Beau Fleuve
Plausibility level	Medium	Bois Blanc

	Mistranslation of Basswood Theory	Horsemeat
First published	1863	Beaver Creek
Synopsis	The Senecas called the area <i>To-se-o-way</i> or <i>De-dyo-syo-oh</i>, meaning "The Place of the Basswood." At the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in Rome in 1784, the Mohawk interpreter rendered it as <i>Tick-e-ack-gou</i>, meaning Buffalo. The Senecas and settlers thereafter used the name Buffalo.	Seneca Name
Evidence in favor	Basswood trees were prevalent here.	Bison
Evidence opposed	Ketchum wrote: "The Indians applied the name <i>Te-osah-way</i> (Place of Basswood) to their settlement or village, and <i>Tick-e-ack-gou-ga-ha-hunda</i> (Buffalo creek), to the stream only. According to Guy Salisbury, quoting Gideon Ball, "The Indians disavowed the name of Buffalo Creek and gave the name by which they and their people had always known the place prior to its settlement by the whites as <i>Teu-shu-wa</i>, "place of basswoods."	Basswood
Sources	Salisbury, Guy. "The Origin of the Name of the City of Buffalo." <i>Historical Magazine</i>, October 1863, pp. 325-326 Mss. A00-25 Ball, Gideon J. Letter: Erie, to Guy H. Salisbury, Buffalo, N.Y., 1863 Aug. 28 In the Buffalo History Museum collection, not digitized. "How Buffalo Was Named." <i>Buffalo Live Wire</i>, January 1914, pp. 16-18 Q11 .N82 no. 108, p. 62 Beauchamp, William New York State Museum Bulletin 108: Aboriginal Place Names of New York Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, 1907 "Names of Indian Origin." Sixth Report of the United States Geographic Board, 1890-1932 Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933; reprinted by Gale, 1967, p. 13	Beau Fleuve
Plausibility level	High	Bois Blanc

	Corruption of Beau Fleuve Theory	Horsemeat
First published	1895	Beaver Creek
Synopsis	The initial version, proposed by Rev. Samuel T. Clarke in 1895, is that unnamed French explorers came up with <i>beau fleuve</i> ("beautiful river"), which was then mispronounced by subsequent English settlers as Buffalo. The next iteration, from F.W. Schmidt's 1914 article in <i>Buffalo Live Wire</i>, is that Father Louis Hennepin declared Buffalo Creek <i>le beau fleuve</i>, "beautiful river." His native guides adopted the French words as <i>boo-flo</i>. Eventually the phrase was anglicized as Buffalo. Rev. Henry B. Laudenbach revived the theory in 1938.	Seneca Name
Evidence in favor		Bison
Evidence opposed	The phrase has not yet been found in any French maps or explorer accounts of the period. During the contact and settlement period, there is no record of Haudenosaunee people discarding their own place names in favor of European ones. Iroquoian languages are known for their lack of labial consonants, the sounds that are produced by fully or partially closing the lips. B and F sounds are absent from these languages. It is unlikely that any Haudenosaunee would have come up with <i>boo-flo</i>.	Basswood
Sources	"Buffalo's Earliest Days: The Fine Lecture on the Inception and Growth of the City of Buffalo by Rev. Samuel T. Clarke Last Night." <i>Buffalo Evening News</i>, March 23, 1895 "Etymologically, What is Buffalo?" <i>Buffalo Live Wire</i>, July 1911, pp. 289-290 Schmidt, F.W. "How Buffalo was named." <i>Buffalo Live Wire</i>, January 1914, pp. 16-18 Laudenbach, Rev. Henry B. "Document Says Indians Got Title from Explorer, Pronounced Creek Bo-Flo." <i>Buffalo Times</i>, Sept. 18, 1938, p. 4-B Fox, Austin M. "Le Beau Fleuve and All That." <i>Buffalo Spree</i>, Spring 1989 Iroquoian languages. <i>Wikipedia.com</i>, retrieved 3 April 2021.	Beau Fleuve
Plausibility level	Low	Bois Blanc

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM	Corruption of Boiblanc Theory	Horsemeat
First published	1907	Beaver Creek
Synopsis	The name <i>R. au boiblanc</i> ("River of basswoods") appears on a map of what is now upstate and western New York. It was drawn for the French army in 1758 by Captain Pierre Pouchot, a military engineer. William Beauchamp suggests that this phrase might have been corrupted as Buffalo. A 2021 iteration holds that <i>boiblanc</i> was pronounced <i>bob-lo</i>, which was then corrupted as Buffalo.	Seneca Name
Evidence in favor	Wikipedia articles about Boisblanc Islands in Mackinac County, MI, and in Ontario, Canada, state that local populations pronounce them <i>bob-lo</i> .	Bison
Evidence opposed	Archaeologist Frederick Houghton identifies <i>R. au boiblanc</i> on Pouchot's map as Tonawanda Creek, not Buffalo Creek. South of <i>Boiblanc</i>, Pouchot drew two creeks that match the locations and routes of Scajaquada Creek and Buffalo Creek. Neither is named on his map. Other North American places are named Bois Blanc and pronounced <i>bob-lo</i> without it morphing into anything else.	Basswood
Sources	Pouchot's map was reprinted and tipped into: F122 .D66 v. 10, pp. 694-695 O'Callaghan, E.B., ed. Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York Albany, NY: Weed and Parsons, 1858 Q11 .N82 no. 108, p. 62 Beauchamp, William New York State Museum Bulletin 108: Aboriginal Place Names of New York Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, 1907 Houghton, Frederick "Indian Occupancy of the Niagara Frontier." <i>Bulletin of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences</i>, vol. IX, no. 3, 1909, p. 284 Bois Blanc Island (Michigan). Wikipedia.com, retrieved April 3, 2021 Bois Blank Island (Ontario) Wikipedia.com, retrieved April 12, 2021 Van Remmen, Joseph Boblo the origin of the name "Buffalo" <i>BuffaloRising.com</i>, January 24, 2021	Beau Fleuve
Plausibility level	Low	Bois Blanc